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A DELEUZIAN
“SENSATION:”**

**NOTES ON THE POST-CINEMATIC
TABLEAUX VIVANTS OF LECH MAJEWSKI,
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The *Tableau* as a Post-Cinematic Image

The *tableau vivant* in cinema has always been the terrain of liminalities, framing an image at the thresholds of film, photography, painting, sculpture, theatre, performance, and even literature (considering the narratives it may ekphrastically conjure up through its references). More recently we can also witness extremely productive intersections between film, video, installation art, and digital media. Video art installations experiment with the *tableau* form of animated still pictures, often making use of famous paintings or sculptures (e.g. Eve Sussman’s *89 Seconds at Alcázar*, 2004, expanding the world of Velázquez’s famous painting, *Las Meninas*, into a cinematic sequence of bodies in motion displayed in a continuous loop, or Adad Hannah’s video stills, which show moving images of immobile people in interaction with famous artworks in a museum²). In David Claerbout’s single channel video installation entitled *Oil Workers (from the Shell Company of Nigeria) Returning Home from Work, Caught in Torrential Rain* (2013) a low resolution photograph found on the internet is reproduced with 3D computer techniques and a simple camera movement as a high definition photo-filmic *tableau*³ becoming a meditation upon medial differences, and upon the sensuous

¹ This work was supported by a grant of the Romanian Ministry of National Education, CNCS – UEFISCDI, project number PN-II-ID-PCE-2012-4-0573.

² See Hannah’s *Museum Stills* series of 2002 alongside other projects playing with the format of the *tableau vivant* and the structure of *mise en abyme* on his website: <http://adadhannah.com/>. (Last accessed 1. 09. 2014.)

³ See a more detailed description of the project and an excerpt of the video on the artist’s website: <http://davidclaerbout.com/Oil-workers-from-the-Shell-company-of-Nigeria-returning-home-from>. (Last accessed 1. 09. 2014.)

impression of bodies and matter achieved in the remediated image. The digital era also revitalizes the *tableau vivant* as a form in which high art seeps into popular culture. Motion picture “adaptations” of famous artworks have also become fashionable in advertising, moreover, applications have been developed for everyday users of smart phones and tablets that enable them to make reproductions of paintings, or their own photographs seem to come alive with the introduction of a few elements of movement into the pictures.⁴ The fondness for transforming images into *tableaux vivants* perceived as stillness unfolding into subtle motion is perhaps also well exemplified by the latest trend in web design of the so-called “parallax scrolling” technique, in which the background image (often a high resolution photograph) moving at a slower rate to the foreground creates a 3D effect as one scrolls down the page. Hence, the contemporary *tableau vivant* in all its ubiquity may be considered not just an essentially intermedial image, but a typical post-photographic and post-cinematic image of our times, blurring the boundaries between media, connecting the “photographic” and the “cinematic” experience not only to almost any of the traditional arts, but also to a media world dominated by digital networks, movements of convergence, and trans-medialization.

In cinema we see experiments that match the general interest in painterly *tableaux* that seems to permeate all layers of contemporary visual culture, and that sometimes result in films that constitute extensions of the *tableau vivant* into feature film length moving image projects that embrace an ambivalent status: they can be shown either as feature films or as video projections in an art gallery. In such hybrid cinematic projects the *tableau* form can be regarded more than a trope in a rhetorical sense, a mere ornament of style or a vehicle for conveying a condensed symbolic or allegorical meaning, which has often been the case both in the great self-reflexive films of modern and postmodern cinema.⁵ Instead, it can be seen

⁴ See Rino Stefano Tagliafierro’s animation of paintings in an experimental video titled *Beauty* that was shown at several film festivals around the globe in 2014, and which was also accompanied by the creation of an application that makes it possible for its users, with the help of an available database of digital images, to experiment with animated paintings on their own using their phones or tablets. (See an excerpt of the video here: <http://www.rinostefanotagliafierro.com/beauty-video.html>. Last accessed 1. 09. 2014.)

⁵ An allegorical use of paraphrases of paintings can also be observed in recent East European cinema, in films that use the *tableau vivant* as a means to imply the existence of a “bigger picture,” and revert to universal stories staging mythological themes of genesis, apocalypse, the loss of Paradise, and sacrifice. See a theoretical investigation of this in the films of György Pálfi, Benedek Fliegauf, Kornél

as a site where authors can experiment with new affective-performative aspects of the moving image, and where the inherent tensions and intricate relations between both elements of the syntagm, *tableau vivant*, i.e. *living picture* can be emphasized: connecting the artificiality and stillness of the mediated “image” with the volatile phenomena of “life,” and the corporeal, sensual experience of the flesh. Brigitte Peucker notes that the “*tableau vivant* is central to the staging of intermediality in film” revealing “the merger of representation with reality” (2007, 14), and this can also happen – especially in its recent manifestations – in a form in which complex relationships between image and body, art and life are not only implied, but explicitly and manifoldly thematized.

In the works of Lech Majewski (Poland), Sharunas Bartas (Lithuania), and Ihor Podolchak (Ukraine) we have a unique corpus of such “post-cinematic” films, with autonomous sequences that can be also displayed as installation art, and that offer ample examples of *tableaux vivants* conceived of such polarizations of bodies and images perceivable in the synesthetic liminal space of different arts. In what follows I propose to delimit and theorize these two interrelated aspects in some of their films: a) the interpretation of the relationship between bodies and images from an analytic, anthropological point of view based on Hans Belting’s concepts of image, body and medium; b) the description of the *tableau* style pictorialism in these works through the Deleuzian concept of “sensation” and its relationship with figurativity, gesture and composition.

The *Tableau* as a Container for Chiastic Interchanges: Image versus Body – Art versus Life

In this particular paradigm we find films in which the *tableau* is used not for the sake of creating satirical or aestheticized detachment, but as a way to emphasize the palpable interaction, interpenetration of art and life, as well as a chiastic interchangeability of image and body. Among the directors mentioned above, Lech Majewski’s work is perhaps the most remarkable for the extremely versatile ways in which he reconceives the cinematic *tableau vivant*, exploiting its affective and embodied aspects through a chiastic doubling of this trope: by repeatedly showing bodies caught in the act of (re)constructing or deconstructing a painting, and painting unfolding, or being dismembered into individual bodies, textures and “tissues.”

In another, more detailed essay, I have analysed how Majewski’s *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (2004)⁶ may be considered as a reflection upon the decomposition of cinema in the post-media age. Here I would like to emphasize how the *tableau vivant* constitutes for him not a means for establishing an ironic distance, but an emotionally charged ritual, breaking down the barriers between life and art, art and life. The film presents a dying woman and her lover who travel to Venice and spend their last days together by making a documentary (or perhaps only an amateur home movie) on Bosch’s eponymous painting searching for its sources of inspiration in real life, re-creating and video recording erotic scenes from it as *tableaux vivants*. In an attempt to divert her attention from her illness and from the experience of her failing body, the couple engages in a series of private “performances” staging and filming details of Bosch’s *Garden* as “living pictures,” seeing in them a playful celebration of the sensual wonders of both art and life. [Figs. 1–4.]

Figures 1–4. Lech Majewski: *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (2004).



The story unfolds from the protagonists’ video recordings that we see after the woman has already passed away, as the surviving young man

⁶ *The Garden of Intermedial Delights. Cinematic “Adaptations” of Bosch from Modernism to the Postmedia Age*, forthcoming in *Screen* (Pethő 2014b). Here I summarize some of the ideas expressed in that article about the relationship between images and bodies.

obsessively replays them while he is also making a recording of this act of mourning his lost love. Accordingly, the film was shot entirely on video producing a maze of mirror reflections with the characters continually looking into the lens of the small camera held at arm's length. In this way skin, canvas and screen, painting and video are continuously folded upon each other to produce a sensual interface for cinematic memory on the one hand, and the perception of the "chemistry" between art and life, on the other. As a result, the moving image itself becomes a unique "membrane" for a fusion between art, bodies and the movie camera with which they are shown in a perpetual symbiosis, video appearing not just as embodied technology in a post-phenomenological sense (i.e. a prosthesis both for the eye and the touch), but – also corresponding to what Don Ihde (1995) termed as the "alterity relation" to technology⁷ – the camera appears as a body in-between bodies, as well as "an object of fascination" that requires the constant interaction of the eye and the hand (it needs to be looked at, and touched). Thus the video recording of intimacy is doubled by the intimacy of the video recording, (and an unusual intimacy with the camera as an object). Consequently, the "camera eye" of classical cinema morphs into the "camera-body" of a "domesticated" digital medium.

The explicit interaction with the camera that is foregrounded in this film may point to a fascination with "imageness" and with the possibilities of new technologies that underlies more subtly in many contemporary art projects that may be placed in-between feature films, experimental cinema and new media art. Perhaps the most eloquent example of this is Majewski's *The Mill and the Cross* (2011), a feature film length *tableau vivant*, also exhibited in a shorter version as a multichannel installation titled *Brueghel Suite*,⁸ where the performative quality of cinematic technology itself comes to the fore⁹ as a virtuoso exercise in post-cinema, mixing painted backgrounds, photographic techniques within a digital collage. The film presents in a self-reflexive and metaleptic loop the creation of Pieter

⁷ With "alterity relations" technology becomes the other or quasi-other to which one relates. See more about these relations in Ihde's *Postphenomenology* (1995).

⁸ The artist's personal website (<http://www.lechmajewski.com/>) defines the film as a "unique digital tapestry," and although it can be considered a theatrical movie, the film has often been shown in museum spaces around the world. In 2011 parts of it were displayed as a moving image installation both in the Louvre and in Venice as a part of the 54th Biennale.

⁹ In many ways Majewski's film constitutes an alternative to Alexander Sokurov's *Russian Ark* (2002) in which the virtuoso camera, travelling through the rooms in one continuous take throughout the film, achieves a sensation of the "technological sublime" alongside the emphatic use of paintings, and the elaborate choreography of bodies in motion.

Brueghel the Elder’s 1564 masterpiece, *The Procession to Calvary* in the same space with the “characters” represented by the painting, showing the viewer scenes in which Brueghel arranges the models for his composition, makes sketches for the painting, embedding the figure of the painter within the painting he is working on. [Figs. 5–6.]

Figures 5–6. *The Mill and the Cross* (2011): the self-reflexive, metaleptic loop of the painter and his models incorporated within the painting being created.



And while the space of the painting and the fictional context (re)created in the film collapses into one cinematic spatial construct, the time frames also overlap: we can see the painting both from the

perspective of its coming into being (thus somehow from *before* it became fixed and framed for eternity¹⁰) and also from considerable distance *after* its completion, from the perspective of today's viewer already familiar with Brueghel's work. This duality corresponding to the vantage points of "life" (the scenes captured by the painter played by Rutger Hauer in the film, the scenes of the painting brought to life in the film) and of the "image," the painting as a finished artwork that we already know, which frames them all. Life is framed by the act of painting and, the other way round, the painting as an art object and representation is framed by the larger context of all the lives of the multitude of little figures that we now see in it together with that of the painter who painted them. On top of all this, Majewski's work, "the digital tapestry" elegantly folds back upon itself, showing us how cinema (and new digital media) can reframe them all. Majewski emphasizes this latter viewpoint at the end of the film by wrapping up the cinematic *tableau* in an even further reflexive frame as the camera slowly backs away from the scene revealing the original Brueghel picture hanging in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna [Fig. 7]. The details of Brueghel's painting itself are spread out into a series of loosely connected vignettes in the film focusing on the activities of the small figures at the foot of the Calvary. As the panorama breaks down into the individual scenes that often display frames within frames acting as small *tableaux* within the overall *tableau* [Fig. 8], the hybrid moving image becomes a unique platform for a fusion between the sublime art of painting, the tangibility of moving, bleeding bodies, and the technical wonder of digital cinema.

The metaleptic loop between painter and his painting, furthermore, between the painting in the film and the original in the museum that we see in *The Mill and the Cross*, is also consistent with the current penchant in cinema for tangled narrative hierarchies and stunning pictorial effects, or for self-reflexive *mise en abyme* constructions in video art.

¹⁰ This may remind us of the complex relationship Pierre Klossowski describes between life and art in the practice of the *tableau vivant*, in which the *tableau* can be seen as both something that precedes the painting (as a model, an unfinished gesture) being inscribed in the painting, and as something that may reproduce a painting in search of the original gesture, as illustrated also by Raul Ruiz's *Hypothesis of a Stolen Painting* (*L'Hypothèse du tableau volé*, 1978), based on Klossowski's novel. The *tableau vivant*, according to Klossowski, is "not simply life imitating art [...]. The emotion sought after was that of life giving itself as a spectacle to life; of life hanging in suspense" (1969, 100).

Figures 7-8. Lech Majewski: *The Mill and the Cross* (2011).

The way the still composition, the image-world of the painting unwinds in the film into a diegetic space around the figures transformed into characters of a multi-linear, fragmented narrative that provides glimpses into the anonymous, everyday life lived in the shadow of the “grand narrative” of the Passion of Christ, may even remind us of the logic of transmedia storytelling that has become so popular in our networked culture, and in which narratives are developed and expanded *ad infinitum* within an overarching storyworld, making use of different media. Painted scenery, cinematic *tableau vivant*, or naturalistic scenes of action, verbal

narrative come together as extensions of the same world depicted by Brueghel's original canvas.¹¹ From this point of view, therefore, Majewski's elaborate, multimedial fiction is fashioned not as a restaging or an adaptation (of either the painting or of Michael Francis Gibson's eponymous book that inspired the director), but as an effective narrative trans-medialization capitalizing on the possibilities of intermediality in digital cinema (i.e. on the hybridity of the image that combines different media, and on the hybridity of the format: viewed either as a single movie or as a multichannel installation). At the same time, this structure of *The Mill and the Cross* also enacts the basic "narrative" of the still image as a medium, displaying the process of characters and stories being fleshed out in the imagination of the viewer, and pointing to the chiasmic relationship of bodies constituting images and images unfolding into bodies.

Majewski's preceding work, *Glass Lips* (2007), a dialogue-free surrealistic film, offers a whole set of kaleidoscopic variations of such chiasmic interchanges within *tableau* style compositions. The film was assembled from 33 pieces of independent video shorts originally shown as a gallery installation with the title *Blood of a Poet* (a deliberate homage to Cocteau) at the 2006 Majewski retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (and a year later the collection was included in the programme of the Venice Biennale, shown on multiple screens on different locations before being put together as a feature film for theatrical release).¹² The "attraction" and interchange between humans and the animate and the inanimate world, between human body and animal flesh, between humans and objects, the juxtaposition of representations and palpable reality, image and body, art and life runs through the film as a *leitmotif* that connects the individual episodes. In a chiasmic exchange we see in the beginning of the movie how a baby is tied with an umbilical cord to a rock amid a breathtaking scenery of high mountain peaks, glacial lakes and gorges of the kind immortalized by the Romantic paintings of Caspar David Friedrich, in a later scene we see a postcard of these mountains pinned to the wall of a hospital where a young woman seems to be fascinated by it and where, in a later scene, she is shown to be in labour giving birth to a huge piece of stone. Towards the end of the movie we

¹¹ In another article I have also discussed Majewski's film as a palimpsest of narratives and narrative modes (*The Vertigo of the Single Image: From the Classic Narrative "Glitch" to the Post-Cinematic Adaptations of Paintings*, 2013).

¹² See pictures and information at the artist's website: http://www.lechmajewski.com/html/blood_of_a_poet.html. (Last accessed 1. 09 2014.)

find the recurrence of the “umbilical cord theme” as a woman’s arm is connected by an intravenous tube to a satellite dish.¹³ [Figs. 9–16.]

Figures 9–16. The “attraction” between humans and objects, art and “life” in Majewski’s *Glass Lips* (2007).



¹³ These kinds of bizarre associations constitute a recurring motif in Majewski’s films, in the *Roe’s Room* (1997), which we will discuss later in this article, we see grass growing inside a house, and pictures bleeding on the wall, in *Gospel according to Harry* (1994) TV screens grow in the desert.

In a short scene that we may regard as perhaps the centerpiece of this ambivalent, installation art/theatrical movie project, Majewski reveals in a very simple interaction between art and its beholders, between representation and reality, an important new vantage point over the cinematic *tableau vivant*, and which may also be interpreted as a minimalist allegory of what happens in such films. In this we see how the young man whom we identify as the protagonist of these loosely linked sequences visits an unidentified museum which will soon become the setting for a bizarre ritual (that may only take place in his own imagination, as the technique of superimposed images might suggest to us in the end of the episode): the spectators gathering in front of Rogier van der Weyden's painting, *The Descent from the Cross*,¹⁴ all of a sudden begin to undress and put on robes and assume poses to imitate the painting until they reproduce the same scene, creating a *tableau vivant* with the original picture standing in the background as an art object included within the act of a performance. [Figs.17–18.] As the spectators become incarnations of the image, the painting acts as a silent witness to the whole event, and the roles become reversed: the viewers assume the position of the objects of our gaze. At the same time, as the composition is reassembled, the embodied image becomes the product of a precise choreography of movements, of the arrangement of fabric, and of an exercise in human discipline. The “performance” caught on camera not only transmutes the Biblical scene into an amateurish theatrical role play, but also “secularizes” the revered artwork through emphasizing not an aesthetic, not even a narrative, but an essentially analytic and “anthropological” perspective, reminding us of Hans Belting's theory of images which ascribes special importance to the interaction of body, image and medium as a performative process. In Belting's words, “images are neither on the wall (or on the screen) nor in the head alone. They do not exist by themselves, but they happen; they take place whether they are moving images (where this is so obvious) or not. They happen via transmission and perception.” (2005, 302–303.) “Image and medium both are linked with the body,” Belting claims, for “perception alone does not explain the interaction of body and medium that takes place in the transmission of images. Images [...] *happen*, or are *negotiated*, between bodies and media. [...] Bodies *perform* images (of themselves or even against themselves) as much as they perceive outside images. In this double sense, they are living media” (2005, 311, emphasis in the original).

¹⁴ The painting is exhibited in the Prado Museum in Madrid, but unlike Majewski's *The Mill and the Cross*, the sequence deliberately avoids any reference to place showing only the bare white walls surrounding it.

Figures 17–18. The re-enactment of Rogier van der Weyden’s painting, *The Descent from the Cross* (c. 1435) in Majewski’s *Glass Lips*.



The original Early Netherlandish painting which creates in its unique, compact way a whole, self-contained world and narrates a poignant story, is famous for the expression of grief and the “shining pearls” of tears on the faces.¹⁵ Here, however, the picture as a *tableau vivant* is no longer

¹⁵ See Erwin Panofsky’s remark on the painting: “It may be said that the painted tear, a shining pearl born of the strongest emotion, epitomizes that which Italian

about the Biblical narrative but about the people performing it, and about the events of this “performance.” Van der Weyden’s picture is reduced to a mere backdrop to the action, while the group of people become the mediums for a different “image” that dismembers the unified composition of the painting into individual bodies, not only substituting the canvas and the stroke of the painter’s brush with the surface of skin and the movement of the camera gliding along the body, but also introducing a crucial element: instead of the rich emotions depicted by the original painting resonating with their potentially empathic spectator, we have the impassible interaction of the fragmented body and the camera, as well as the emergence of a specifically cinematic “sensation” through the close-up of the trembling flesh. [Figs. 19–23.] The palpable corporeality of such a photo-filmic image released from both its original materiality and its plastic figurativeness may bring to mind what Deleuze calls in his book on Bacon the encounter with a “body of sensation,” uniting a sensation that “is transmitted directly, and avoids the detour and boredom of conveying a story” (2003, 36), something that is located not in the eye of the beholder, or “in the air,” but directly “in the body,” with the body itself that can be understood as a “figure,” not a “structure” (2003, 20), the “body of sensation” being in this way “the submission of the figurative to sensation” in the words of Elizabeth Grosz (2008, 88) interpreting Deleuze.

Or the way Majewski gradually breaks down the scene – from people walking around and contemplating the artwork exhibited in the museum to dressing up and assuming their poses to match the ones in van der Weyden’s painting, to the camera zooming in on disconnected body parts, the texture of skin and flesh, as well as the small movements observable on the level of living tissue – all of this might also remind us of Giorgio Agamben’s (1993, 138) comment on Deleuze that it is *gesture* rather than the *image* that is the essentially cinematic element in film. And although some interpreters may see in this comment something that clearly sets Deleuze and Agamben apart, rather than as a connection between their theories (which is probably justified if we take into consideration Deleuze’s two books on cinema), in what follows, I will argue that Deleuze’s ideas, not on the type of cinematic images (i.e. the movement-image or the time-image), but mostly on the type of painting practiced by Francis Bacon, his notion of “sensation” can be seen in convergence with Agamben’s notes on gestures in cinema.

most admired in Early Flemish painting: pictorial brilliance and sentiment” (1953, 258).

Figures 19–23. The expression of grief, the “shining pearls” of tears on the faces in the painting (E. Panofsky) versus an impassible choreography of cinematic movements.



“Give me an *Image*, Then!” Cinematic Pictorialism in-between “Sensation” and Figurativity, Gesture and Composition

Majewski's *The Roe's Room* (*Pokój saren*, 1997), Sharunas Bartas's *The House* (*A Casa*, 1997), and Ihor Podolchak's *Las Meninas* (2008) are all feature film length cinematic works, comparable to some of other recent movies bordering on installation art,¹⁶ and that rely on such a Deleuzian “sensation” – conceived mainly as a succession of images perceivable in the in-between zone of several arts (poetry, painting, music, video art and cinema). In each of them it seems that the main character is a house, not the people inhabiting it, a house acting not as a location for a narrative, but rather as a mere binding for the unfolding images which appear like single channel video art displays exhibited in a gallery. In each case the house appears as a fictional space where sensual impressions, recollections are reshaped by an artistic imagination. Neither of them presents any story in a conventional sense, just a series of monotonous everyday activities (like sleeping, preparing meals, eating, moving from one room to another and gazing at things, punctuated by the changes of the seasons).

As such, they are relevant for the study of contemporary inflections of the post-cinematic *tableau vivant* not only due to the fact that they extend the *tableau* style over the entire length of the movies (which makes them somewhat unusual even in the so-called slow film canon that has gained terrain in the last decades within the global festival circuit), but because using the confined diegetic space and visual frame of the house and its rooms for staging their *tableau*-like images, they construct a model in which the *tableau vivant* emerges as a “container” that may effectively hold and fold together the artificiality of being composed and framed as a self-enclosed “image” with the sensuous experience of the vibrancy of “life,” manifest in contingency, corporeality, texture and gesture. This is in essence the same model that we also find in many of the exhibited photofilmic *tableaux* or single channel video installations in contemporary art. Eve Sussman uses the space of Alcázar palace in a similar way in her

¹⁶ We may compare them for example to Tsai Ming-Liang's *Face* (*Visage*, 2009) which also consists of a loose string of vignettes. Ming-Liang's film (partially funded by the Louvre Museum in Paris) uses the spaces in and around the Louvre (its exhibition halls and its royal apartments) to create a dreamlike world connecting in a similar way the inside with the outside, art and life, cinema and painting.

high definition video “transcript” of Velázquez’s *Las Meninas*, *89 Seconds at Alcázar*, to reframe the original painting as a collection of sensuous impressions of bodies moving within a room. The multiple screen structures boxing in the images used by Bill Viola in some of his video artworks exploit this very same dynamics between the confinement of the frame and the sensuous quality of bodies, fabrics, natural elements, along with the foregrounding of gestures.

In Majewski’s surrealist vision the house is a container for a lyrical autobiography tapping into his own memories as a young man, a unique Gesamtkunstwerk offering the viewers an opera in the form of a “video fresco” as he calls it in his commentary for the DVD edition.¹⁷ The film starts with a self-reflexive gesture, we hear Majewski’s voice instructing his actors to stand motionless and look into the camera, thus implicitly, at him directing the movie. The family, father, mother, son pose as in a photograph, and the film begins with this *tableau* inviting us into the world of the film as if viewing a family picture (also acting as a magic mirror opening up a window for the author to access and share his memories). [Fig. 24.] And as soon as the invisible connection between author and narration, presence and remembrance, Majewski and his actors is established, the film unfolds in a unique choreography of stillness and movement, silence and music; showing people framed in still compositions, quietly inhabiting the rooms, interacting each with their characteristic objects in silence (mother with the house plants, father with his books and stamp collection, the son with the pictures on the wall, or filmed against the window which reveals a beautiful girl across the house, etc.), while the orchestra plays the enchanting score composed by Majewski himself together with Józef Skrzek.¹⁸

¹⁷ Majewski confesses in the same audio commentary to the DVD: “The origin of *The Roe’s Room* starts with my poems. I am basically a painter and a poet,” adding that the immediate source of the script/libretto was a cycle of poems he wrote at the time he was in film school, and that was published with the title *Home*. *The Roe’s Room* was originally written as an opera that was presented as such, as a live, theatrical show in March 1996 at the Silesian Opera. Majewski made the fiction film based on this opera a year later, which was subsequently also screened at several art museums and galleries: Buenos Aires Museum of Modern Art (2000), Palagraziussi Venice (Venice Biennale, 2001), Museum of Modern Art, New York (2002), Galerie Nationale du Jeu de Paume, Paris (2004), the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (2007).

¹⁸ In the audio commentary to the DVD Majewski admits that having experienced a series of contemporary opera works as “torture,” it was his deliberate goal to write a kind of melodious, spiritually and emotionally uplifting music that he admired in the old Romantic masters.

The camera glides unobstructedly to and fro, horizontally stitching together the images within a panoramic, panning movement across the rooms, or moves up and down the different levels of the house, all in a majestic slowness, as we hear songs performed as inner monologues and pieces of choir music added to the sumptuous images in a voice over. There is no real story, at least not in the conventional sense, only images, and images superimposed on other images that build a poetic space (a space of art and a symbolic space of the soul and mind) changing with the sequence of the seasons to make the passing of time palpable, a space where memories can be conjured up and imagination can flourish, a space overflowing with archetypal and Biblical symbolism, as the house appears like an enchanted castle and a place for rituals of initiations, a setting where the cycle of life unfolds, a place defined by light and darkness, by the presence of the elements (earth, fire, water), but it is also an Edenic place bringing together a variety of living and inanimate things, and where we are constantly reminded of Christianity through the presence of the crucifix. [Figs. 24–27.]

Figures 24–27. Lech Majewski: *The Roe's Room* (1997), an opera in the form of a “video fresco.”



In what is perhaps one of the most poetic autobiographies in recent cinema, the sensuous experience of music, rhythm, poetic language and painterly image conveys both a young man’s sensual and spiritual awakening to all that is magical in life and the adult Majewski’s nostalgic recollection of the impressions that have shaped his sensitivity as an artist.

Bartas’s *The House* unfolds in a similar manner, like a continuous dream, and also like in the case of Majewski’s visual poem, the inspiration comes from poetry.¹⁹ The only words we hear are in the first two minutes of the film in which a male voice over recites a few lines spoken in French. The lyrical text addresses an unnamed (and absent) “Mother”²⁰ as in an interior monologue and speaks of frustrations in communication, the fleeting sensation of time and the endurance of the subjective images in one’s mind, placing the whole vision somewhere between recollection and fantasy.²¹ The film was made as a Lithuanian, French and Portuguese coproduction and with an international cast including the French director, Leos Carax, appearing in a small role (in a static pose, wrapped in a thick “armour” made of newspapers glued together with a book in his hand, see Fig. 31). In its introductory sequence it evokes two important predecessors for this type of cinema: the films of Andrei Tarkovsky (in the title sequence we hear the same fragment from Bach’s *St Matthew Passion*,

¹⁹ See the conversation about the film in Guillaume Coudray’s documentary essay on Bartas’s work, *Sharunas Bartas: An Army of One* (2010).

²⁰ Although some reviewers speak of this as a metaphor for “motherland,” interpreting the film (and the symbolism of the house) as Bartas’s allegoric way of speaking about his country, isolated within a larger, controversial “motherland” and unable to communicate with her, or nurturing highly ambivalent feelings towards her, the film remains up to the end extremely stylized and abstract even though some elements (like the reference to Ilya Repin’s painting of Ivan the Terrible murdering his own son, the presence of the soldiers and menacing army tanks closing in on the house at the end of the film, or the image of the sad, young boy replacing Christ on the cross) may obviously be seen as references to a troubled (though not necessarily contemporary) East European reality. Bartas himself insists on the poetic, “undigested” quality of the film, something “made of primitive feelings” (see Coudray’s documentary).

²¹ Here are a few sentences from this monologue: “Mother, often I wanted to talk to you about everything, but I never did. But deep inside I was talking to you. [...] In the future I am free. Free, because it doesn’t yet exist. I don’t understand the present. The present moment is so fleeting. I’m not really sure that it exists. Mother, time has passed. And I am far from you. What is important, mother, for me, is to believe that these things will not vanish.” In Coudray’s 2010 documentary mentioned in the previous footnotes Bartas speaks of the house in the film being a space of the mind showing the images that we carry within us.

BWV 244 as Tarkovsky used accompanying the detail from Leonardo da Vinci's *The Adoration of the Magi* in the prologue of his last film, *Sacrifice* [Offret, 1986]) and Alain Resnais's *Last Year at Marienbad* (*L'année dernière à Marienbad*, 1961), which also begins with a dreamlike and repetitive voice over narration, and in which the majestic edifice shown from the outside emerges as a similarly enigmatic image framing the film and the wandering of the protagonist inside the building itself presented like a passage through a labyrinth. While in Majewski's film there is a family living inside the house, clearly making it their own through gestures and rituals, Bartas's house reveals (deploying a similarly dense archetypal and Christian symbolism as Majewski's haunting vision) a mere collection of picturesque animals and objects, of people of different ages and races (men and women, young and old, beautiful and ugly, black and white, naked and clothed) appearing one after the other, engaged in different, mostly solitary, quiet activities, or sitting motionless, displayed as "exhibits" within *tableau vivant*-like compositions²² [Figs. 28–35], as the young male protagonist goes from room to room, observing them.

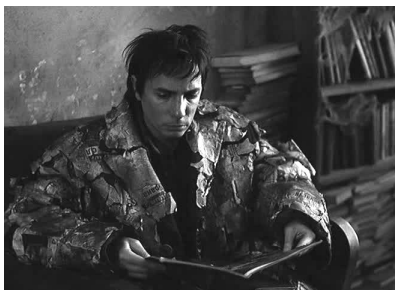
Ihor Podolchak, who is also a well-known painter, photographer and installation artist,²³ presents in his enigmatic *Las Meninas* a house full of mirrors and mirroring surfaces in which images are reflected and multiplied acquiring an eerie, trance-like quality (hence the reference in the title to the reflexive structure of Velazquez's painting). As a veritable tour de force in cinematography, Podolchak claims to have filmed 70–75% of the film through mirrors.²⁴ The film takes the viewer into the dull, everyday routine of a family (elderly parents, a grown up daughter, a sickly son) with slow, static shots showing them mostly in their dining room as they eat or prepare to eat, or, sometimes, play music, or get dressed. Time and reality, vague as they appear, also get refracted: some of the scenes seem to take place in the past, when the son was merely a

²² Bartas's next film, *Freedom* (2000), is conceived similarly as a string of beautiful *tableau* compositions, this time, however, perhaps as a deliberate antithesis, away from the framing structures provided by houses and rooms: presenting its characters in vast open spaces, as figures in a landscape in sensuous interconnection with the elements (water, wind, sand) as they "escape" to a desolate land of picturesque nothingness.

²³ He has also risen to some fame due to the fact that he is the author of the first art exhibition ever to be held in space, as two small woodcut prints made by him were taken by Russian cosmonauts on the Mir Space Station in 1993. (See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SnKcWWHj_hY. Last accessed 1. 09. 2014.)

²⁴ See: <http://www.kinokultura.com/specials/9/lasmeninas.shtml>. (Last accessed 1. 09. 2014.)

Figures 28–35. Sharunas Bartas: *The House* (1997).



boy, and some appear as pure fantasy. The film is further hybridized by the collaboration of the American music video director Dean Karr, who directed a scene in the film which is in stark contrast to the dark greenish tones of the images and the lethargic tempo of the rest of the film with its abrupt editing style and bright colours (thus feels like a dream within a dream).

In all three films many scenes are conceived on the thresholds between cinematic movement and the still image, but also, between narrativity and non-narrativity, as we see a kind of minimalist action taking place in these frames, yet this amounts to in essence no more than a series of gestures (laying the table, spooning the soup, mashing the Brussels sprouts on a plate with a fork, holding a book, sitting silently at the edge of a bed, watering plants, putting on a necklace or a dress, standing at a window, examining stamps through a magnifying glass, arranging fruit in a bowl, etc.). In fact, *Las Meninas*, perhaps even more than Majewski's and Bartas's films, is composed of a fixation on gestures, gestures revealed in fragmented close-ups and repeated over and over again in a world in which house, family, art, perception and memory, present and past become parts of the same organic rhizomatic network. If "cinema – in the words of Agamben – leads images back to the homeland of gesture" (2000, 56), because, Agamben claims, "in the cinema, a society that has lost its gestures seeks to reappropriate what it has lost while simultaneously recording that loss," (1993, 137) then post-cinema in such moving image projects, only amplifies, feeds on this possibility, that we so often see exploited in photo-filmic installation art, of oscillating between the immobility of the pose and its slow dissolution into (often barely perceptible) movement, of building *tableau* compositions around gestures and gestures connected to objects.

In this sense, Podolchak's film, alongside Majewski's and Bartas's work, appears to be a perfect example for a cinematic or post-cinematic "dream of a gesture" (Agamben 1993, 139) transporting the viewer into a visibly subjective and surreal universe of enigmatic pictures, yet, at the same time, bearing the nostalgic, gestural imprints of a long lost lifestyle that we can recognize – even in these stylized frames suggesting timelessness – from our own memories, from old photographs, literary descriptions, paintings or poems. In Majewski's case it is the life in the fifties or sixties of an urban family living in a typical two or three storey, turn of the century townhouse somewhere in Eastern Europe where the old architecture, reminiscent of more glamorous times, is like a communal, extended family nest for its many inhabitants, who have most likely been allotted rooms here replacing the original owners during communist times.

In Podolchak’s *Las Meninas* it is a provincial villa (perhaps sometime in the second half of the 19th or at the beginning of the 20th centuries, in a place that could be anywhere in Europe), with special emphasis on household objects, items of decoration and clothing which could well be the same in any adaptation of Chekhov, Tolstoy or Turgenev. Bartas’s house is perhaps the least specific, yet the pictures on the wall, the large dining hall with the crystal chandelier and people gathered around the long dining table, eating and chattering, the image of the dog lying at the foot of the old woman may seem like similar vestiges of times gone by as Podolchak’s villa.

In each of these films, in the structure of the house, we have a sensuous, liminal space, merging the outside with the inside, the natural with the artificial, with birds wearing bow ties and headdresses [Figs. 30, 31], and humans stripped naked [Fig. 33], paintings that look alive and bleed [Fig. 27], and with bodies framed as paintings or appearing as sculptures (being covered with layers that look like bronze, or being smeared with clay [Figs. 32]) in interconnected rooms displaying signs of dreary decay alongside images of lush life, with vines that crack the walls, and – in Majewski’s and Bartas’s case – people cohabitating with animals, birds and plants [Figs. 26, 29, 30, 34]. As the films progress vegetation seems to conquer all. The father has to cut the grass in the living-room, a huge tree grows inside the house in Majewski’s film opening up the space of the traditional, nuclear family and the young boy’s awakening to the pleasures of the flesh onto the world of uninhibited, adult sexuality as we peek into the life of the promiscuous neighbour through the leaves. In Bartas’s house, by the end of the movie, the flowers planted by the old woman are shown in full bloom in the attic, implying perhaps through the apparent final victory of nature over culture again a triumph of the senses. Images are saturated with the sensation of forms, colours, and sounds. As already mentioned, the soundtrack of Majewski’s *The Roe’s Room* is an opera, and Bartas and Podolchak both use a polyphony of ambient, on and off-screen noises, people playing music, reminding us of the essentially musical nature of Deleuze’s notion of “sensation,” (which he defines as “essentially rhythm,” or appearing as “the *vibration* that flows through the body”– Deleuze 2003, 72.)²⁵

As the camera zooms in on the bodies, which are either youthfully, beautifully erotic (like in *The Roe’s Room*), or often deformed, bizarre (in Bartas’s *The House*), or overweight and unpleasant to watch (as some of

²⁵ See also Elisabeth Grosz’s interpretation of Deleuze: “sensation requires no mediation or translation. It is not representation, sign, symbol, but force, energy, rhythm, resonance” (2008, 73).

the inhabitants of the villa in *Las Meninas*), the movement of the image is absorbed by almost imperceptible movements at the level of skin and texture. Accordingly, what we see in these films is haptic cinema at its richest, a cinema of small gestures, of the flesh, of pulsations, energies, and intensities, where organic and inorganic matter become almost indistinguishable. It is a cinema that can perhaps best be described through the conflicting notions of the Deleuzian “figural” and “figuration.” As Elizabeth Grosz summarizes, “the figural is, for Deleuze, the end of figuration, the abandonment of art as representation, signification, narrative, though it involves the retention of the body, planes, and colors, which it extracts from the figurative” (2008, 88). Relying on Deleuze, Martine Beugnet describes such films in this way: “between the cinema of ‘psychological situations’ and that of pure abstraction, the cinema of sensation opens a space of becoming, a space where the human form is less character and more figure, a figure caught [...] in the *material reality of the film as event*” (Beugnet 2007, 149, emphasis mine, Á. P.). She also says: “one way or another, the cinema of sensation is always drawn towards the formless (*l’informe*): where background and foreground merge, and the subjective body appears to melt into matter” (2007, 65). Deleuze considers such a body a “body without organs,” mere “flesh and nerve” taking on a “spasmodic appearance,” (2003, 45) as he writes in his book on Bacon. He also mentions that “there are two ways of going beyond figuration [in art]: either toward the abstract form, or toward the Figure,” the sensation (2003, 34).

In an article that deals with similar issues focusing on the films of Philippe Grandrieux mainly from the theoretical vantage points defined by Pascal Bonitzer and Georges Didi-Huberman the authors, Fran Benavente and Gloria Salvadó, note that: “there is an extensive trend in contemporary film that focuses on this shift to the logic of sensation or, [...] the ambition to translate the invisible into a disfiguration process of the visible” (2010, 131). What sets these films analyzed here apart from this trend is that “the logic of sensation” applied here does not perform a “disfiguration of the visible,” or at least not exclusively: both building the image around gestures and foregrounding its intermedial qualities (i.e. its associations with paintings) “turn” this process of disfiguration around, back to the territory of figurativity and pictorial composition. [Figs. 36–38.]

Figures 36–38. Ihor Podolchak: *Las Meninas* (2008): haptic images gravitating towards the “formless” and images folding “imageness” back onto themselves.





What is unique in this particular corpus of post-cinematic films is that they continually move toward the fragmented body of sensation, decomposing the narrative “organization” of the sequence, as well as the “optical” structure of image into a haptic space with patches of colours and vibrations of sound, but we also see an obsessively repeated reconstruction of the image as a whole.²⁶ Deleuze begins his chapter on “cinema, body, brain and thought” with these words: “Give me a body then!” saying “life will no longer be made to appear before the categories of thought, thought will be thrown into the categories of life,” indicating a way in which in certain examples of modern cinema “life” can be made accessible not through representing it, but by “thinking” directly through a body, and gestures of the body (Deleuze 1989, 189). The constant re-composition of haptic fragments into *tableau*-like images in the three films mentioned here suggest another path that we might define with the demand (modifying the Deleuzian motto) as “Give me *an image* then!”, an urge to throw, paradoxically, “life” into categories of the *image*. We see this movement for the recovery or reconstruction of the (autonomous, painterly) image from the “formless” mass of flesh and “spasms” dispersed within a haptic space in the recurring mirror reflections that fold

²⁶At the same time we have a loose reconnection with some kind of a narrative frame, as if chaos would gravitate towards order both in image and narrative: Majewski and Bartas use something similar to a stream of consciousness technique with a clearly designated (alter-ego) protagonist whose visions we can directly access, Podolchak frames the film with the image of a man and a woman reminiscing about their past.

the “imageness” back onto itself [Fig. 38], and this is what we see in the instances in which the cinematic frame appears to be haunted by another image, a photo, a painting,²⁷ or a mere echo of *pictorialism* (as an in-between of photography, painting and cinema²⁸). [Figs. 39–41.]

Figures 39–41. Quotations of paintings: Velázquez’s eponymous painting in Podolchak’s *Las Meninas*, Ilya Repin’s *Ivan the Terrible and his Son* in Bartas’s *The House*, and Giorgio de Chirico’s painting in Majewski’s *The Roe’s Room*.



²⁷ In the case of *Las Meninas* the title itself evokes an image that “haunts” the entire film.

²⁸ E.g. we have beautiful still-life compositions of fruit resembling 17th-century baroque compositions in *Las Meninas*.

This process of recovering, framing or reframing a picture which modulates the image in these films in-between the figural and the figurative, confers a new and unexpected dynamic and intensity to rendering visible “forces that are not themselves visible.” Consequently life (or memory, or imagination) does not appear as something represented by images, but as the sensuous experience of moving through a series of images: where the image, re-emerging as a whole, does not show life, it houses its own sensuous, synesthetic, “molecular” life. While the Deleuzian “sensation” always tears bodies into flesh, and “descends flesh from the bones,” (2003, 12) dissolving the picture as an object of observation and redefining it as an object of contact and interaction, what we have here is post-cinema constituting in a *tableau* no less and no more than a space (a “block”) for *becoming* an image, for the experience of *being* an image. In Deleuze and Guattari’s definition “becoming is always double, that which one becomes becomes no less than the one that becomes – block is formed, essentially mobile, never in equilibrium” (2004, 305). Seen from this perspective we may find that bodies become images within a *tableau vivant*, just as much as images become bodies, or the cinematic characteristics of painting in such an image are also made visible at the same time as cinema acquires the quality of painting. Moreover, in each case presented here the *tableau* as a “block” of “becoming” involves not just a triple relationship between image – body – camera, but also multiple metalepses: of art and life, of the observer and the observed (the protagonists of each of these films are repeatedly shown as touching the world around them, looking at pictures as well as being framed within the cinematic *tableau*). The loop of “the formless” into form results in an imageness perceivable both as art permeating the “skin of the screen” and as artificiality, as something visibly produced by an apparatus that records the acts of bodies performing images,²⁹ and performs optical tricks that constantly de-territorialize and re-territorialize the image, along the process through which cinema reaches beyond cinema, into the expanded field of pictorialist photography and a “sensation” of embodied painting.

In such examples – similarly to what we see in contemporary video art *tableaux* – we have a post-cinematic expansion of the in-between zone of narrativity and non-narrativity through a Deleuzian “sensation” that stems from a “molecular,” “unformed” level of cinema, yet repeatedly performs a “folding” of this “figural” back onto the “figuration,” the “molar”

²⁹ This connection is only made self-reflexively palpable in the earlier example of Majewski’s *Garden of Earthly Delights*, where the camera also takes part in the performance itself with its actual interaction with people.

formation of the ambivalent, photo-filmic *tableau vivant*. The *tableau* itself contains the movements in both directions: from “molecular” to “molar,” as well as the other way round. The free flowing images, which constantly break down into mere gestures, into pure “exhibitions of mediality,”³⁰ in Agamben’s words, generate a particular self-reflexive “narrative” in which the gestures of the body become “gestures” of the image itself, unfolding its own “imageness” perceivable in the liminality of arts and media through the sensuous details, thus performing its own mediality and inter-mediality.

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³⁰ Using the example of dance movements Agamben defines gestures as pure “means without end,” exhibiting the “media character of corporal movements” and allowing the emergence of the “being-in-a-medium of human beings” (2000, 58).

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